

Outsourcing threatens benefits of full-day learning ^[1]

Author: Jenkins, Jennifer and Nuamah, Olivia

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EXCERPTS.

With Our Best Future In Mind, the landmark report by Ontario's early learning adviser, advocated full-day, full-year learning for children from pre-kindergarten to Grade 6 in a secure, publicly funded environment - the local school.

The public delivery of extended-day programming was regarded as an essential guarantor of quality. But now the government is on the eve of passing legislation that would allow third-party operators to provide before- and after-school programs.

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One of our main concerns is that many school boards will be tempted to contract with the lowest-cost provider as they try to balance already overstretched budgets. School boards offering extended services must be supported through adequate financing by the Ministry of Education, which has a significant role to play in ensuring that every board can offer high-quality programs.

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Originally, the government had appeared to accept the idea that extended-day programming should be part of the education system. By opening up a part of the system to third-party providers, however, it has raised the spectre of cheaply run services delivered by low-paid workers incapable of ensuring either quality learning or child care.

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Instead, the ministry should mandate that all services be public, that a system for managing consistency and quality be established, and that schools be available for holiday programs, reinforcing the year-round component of the original report.

Programming delivered as a public service with the goal of achieving the best outcomes for children would be a guarantee of quality, unlike services delivered with profit margins in mind - or so cheaply that all potential benefits to children and their families are compromised. Currently, staff employed by third-party providers do not enjoy the same compensation and benefits as those employed by school boards. The training and supports provided by a publically regulated system ensure quality services and, as a result, quality outcomes.

The decision to permit third-party operators also could limit the opportunities for early childhood educators working in school programs to be involved in extended-day activities, especially during school holidays. Consistency is a key component in making before- and after-school programming achieve the best outcomes for children.

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Increased support must be provided to school boards already offering extended-day programming. They deserve support because they are leading the way and encourage other boards to operate extended-day programs directly and not through third parties. Of course, adequate funding is essential.

The first 600 schools to roll out full-day early-learning kindergarten programs have experienced an enormous challenge but also significant success as 35,000 young children entered formal schooling for the first time. This year will see 200 more schools offer this amazing opportunity for 4- and 5-year-old children and their families. In phase three, thousands more will be able to access these programs. This is a guaranteed success for the provincial government.

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